

Friends of Scotsman

GWCT – July 2014

I had the pleasure last week of being a corporate guest at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow – and what a superb day we had. While walking to our host's meeting venue, along the route of the Women's Marathon, I noticed growing by the side of the pavement wild strawberries in what appeared to be unkempt flower beds. There was something charming about this discovery that reminded me of foraging for wild berries when I was young and the excitement of finding the sweetest of fruit growing on a drystone wall – and it was all the tastier for being wild.

Of course, these inner city berries may literally have been the fruits of council gardeners' labours and carefully sited and tended over months but I like to think they were a surprise, a gift from nature, that resulted in a smile on my face and a fond memory. Imagine if fruit trees were planted in all our towns and cities and we were encouraged to harvest and enjoy it?

These tiny treasures got me thinking about how small conservation efforts made on a large scale could have real benefits. The GWCT's senior advisor Hugo Straker recently assisted with a schools project to restore over 150 metres of hedgerow in an effort to improve the nesting habitat for the native grey partridge.

Led by Belhaven Hill School maths teacher Tom Rawson, the pupils planted a traditional Scottish hedge of hawthorn, rowan and blackthorn on a farm near Garvald in East Lothian. This wonderfully practical opportunity to help tomorrow's stewards of the countryside understand the importance of wildlife conservation, has provided an enhanced habitat for grey partridge and other farmland birds. The initiative is part of a wider programme of outdoor education within the school and complements the GWCT's existing Scottish Grey Partridge Project in Midlothian and our regional Grey Partridge Trophy awards.

Instilling an interest in wildlife and stewardship cannot start early enough and it is one of GWCT's main aims to advance the education of the public and those managing the countryside in the effects of farming and management of land which is sympathetic to game and other wildlife.

By boiling down our peer-reviewed science and practical knowledge of how and why rural Scotland ticks, we can deliver this education to the youngest of audiences and the most senior of politicians. It's great fun hosting a group of primary-aged children at a workshop to make pheasant masks or plant sunflower seeds but it's also hugely rewarding to hear our research quoted in Holyrood or integrated into future agri-environment schemes.

To make a real difference to some of Scotland's most fragile species, we need to widen this understanding and garner support. Perhaps one of the most basic messages the GWCT delivers is that game shooting provides an incentive to manage game animals and their habitats. This investment in wildlife management and habitat ameliorates the effects of intensive farming or forestry so improving conservation in the countryside as a whole.

Game management can also benefit animals and plants that have similar requirements. In this way game management can be said to support wildlife conservation overall. Some examples include:

- Upland heather moor has been retained because of grouse shooting

- Upland heather management and predator control increases waders such as curlew and lapwing
- Woodland is planted and retained for pheasants
- Woodland managed for pheasants is more diverse than woodland managed for forestry
- Field margins managed to help partridge chicks also help wild flowers and butterflies
- Game food crops planted as cover for game birds in winter also feed many songbirds

Managing game for shooting and fishing provides motive and money to diversify habitats, reduce pollution, supplement scarce food supplies, and control numbers of some common pests and predators. In this way farms, woodlands and rivers become better places for many plants and animals in addition to game species.

GWCT is currently piloting landscape-scale wildlife recovery by encouraging 'cluster' farms to adopt conservation measures across a number of neighbouring properties – an exciting, innovative approach which we hope will deliver real benefits to our wildlife. A common wealth gain if you like of wildlife.